

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2568
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 1952

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, KS, KN, US
SUBJECT: U.S. CONTACTS WITH NORTH KOREA

REF: SEOUL 1738

1. ROK PRESS, PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT HAVE CAREFULLY NOTED SERIES OF USG STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS WITH REGARD TO NORTH KOREA DURING PAST THREE WEEKS. PRESS HAS PICKED UP EACH EVENT BEGINNING WITH PRESIDENT CARTER'S REFERENCE TO IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH 14 NATIONS WITH WHOM RELATIONS HAVE BEEN DISRUPTED, AT U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FEBRUARY 18, 1977. PRESS AND ROKG HAVE ALSO AT VARIOUS TIMES NOTED SUCH ITEMS AS NEWSWEEK'S PERISCOPE ARTICLE FEBRUARY 22 REGARDING PRESIDENT CARTER'S LETTER TO KIM IL-SONG, NORTH KOREAN ATTENDANCE AT ENVIRONMENTAL MEETING AT STATE DEPARTMENT REPORTED MARCH 3, AND U.S. ACTIONS WITH REGARD TO PASSPORT RESTRICTIONS ON TRAVEL TO NORTH KOREA. PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT REACTION HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY CALM, PERHAPS BECAUSE OF PREOCCUPATION WITH TROOP WITHDRAWAL ISSUE, BUT NERVOUSNESS MAY BE INCREASING.

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2. MOST EDITORIALS CONCERNING EXCHANGE OF MESSAGES WITH KIM IL-SUNG HAVE WARNED AGAINST NORTH KOREAN MACHINATIONS DESIGNED TO DRAW U.S. INTO BILATERAL DIALOGUE AND PRAISED U.S. RESOLUTION NOT TO DISCUSS KOREAN QUESTION WITH OUT PARTICIPATION OF ROKG. A DONGA ILBO FEATURE ARTICLE MARCH 7 BY CORRESPONDENT CH'OE MAENG-HO HAS TAKEN A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT LINE, UNDERSCORING ON THE ONE HAND U.S. INTENTIONS

TO AVOID DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA ON KOREAN PROBLEMS WITHOUT ROK PARTICIPATION, WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND NOTING CHANGES IMPLIED BY UNPRECEDENTED PRESIDENTIAL REPLY TO NORTH KOREAN NOTE. SAME THEME APPEARED IN CHOSUN ILBO EDITORIAL MARCH6.

3. ALTHOUGH INITIAL ROK OFFICIAL REACTION TO NOTIFICATION THAT U.S. WAS LIFTING PASSPORT RESTRICTIONS ON TRAVEL TO NORTH KOREA WAS MILD, YI ANG-HUN, ACTING CHIEF OF MOFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS BUREAU TOLD POLCONS MARCH 8 THERE IS CONCERN WITHIN ROKG ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF LIFTING BAN AT THIS TIME. HE ANTICIPATED CONSIDERABLE NEGATIVE PRESS REACTION WHEN REMOVAL OF RESTRICTIONS OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCED. THUS FAR, HOWEVER, PRESS TREATMENT OF OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH MOFA ON THIS SUBJECT HAS BEEN ACCURATE, LOW-KEY AND UNBIASED.

4. ROKG OFFICIALS WITH WHOM WE HAVE DISCUSSED SUBJECT OF EXCHANGE OF LETTERS WITH NORTH KOREA HAVE BEEN DISCREET IN THEIR COMMENTS. MOFA UN DIVISION DIRECTOR EXPRESSED SOME CONCERN ABOUT IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT SERIES OF APPARENTLY FRIENDLY GESTURES IN DIRECTION OF NORTH KOREA FOR OUTCOME OF KOREAN QUESTION DEBATE IN UNGA. HE EXPRESSED HOPE THAT NON-ALIGNED NATIONS FAVORABLY DISPOSED TOWARD ROK WOULD NOT INTERPRET THESE ACTIONS AS INDICATION OF PENDING RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN U.S. AND NORTH KOREA WHICH MIGHT INFLUENCE THE TO REMAIN NEUTRAL RATHER THAN OPPOSING NORTH KOREA AS IN THE PAST. MANY OF THE ACADEMICIANS WITH WHOM WE HAVE DISCUSSED SUBJECT OF EXCHANGE OF MESSAGES WITH KIM IL-SONG HAVE EXPRESSED MORE CURIOSITY THAN CONCERN. CONFIDENTIAL

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ONE NOTED THAT IF KIM MESSAGE CAME AS COMMUNICATION FROM PAKISTAN TO U.S. AS REPORTED IN PRESS, U.S. NATURALLY HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO RESPOND TO MESSAGE FROM FRIENDLY PAKISTAN GOVERNMENT.

5. ON MARCH 10 ORIENT PRESS CARRIED STORY THAT MOFA HAD SENT URGENT INSTRUCTIONS MARCH 9 TO ROK EMBASSY WASHINGTON TO INVESTIGATE REPORT USG PREPARING TO LIFT TRADE RESTRICTIONS AGAINST NORTH KOREA. ITEM SAID MOFA OFFICIAL CONCERNED MADE CLEAR THAT ISSUE OF U.S. TRADE WITH NK QUITE DIFFERENT FROM TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS AND "BEARS GRAVE IMPLICATIONS," SAYING THAT IF CONFIRMED APPROPRIATE DIPLOMATIC ACTION WILL BE TAKEN. WE HAVE HAD NO OFFICIAL WORD ON THIS FORM MOFA, AND ARE NOT SEEKING ANY. (DEPARTMENT WILL RECALL WE HAVE NOT RAISED ASSETS CONTROL QUESTION WITH MOFA FOR REASONS MENTIONED PARA 1 REFTTEL. ORIENT PRESS STORY MAY BE BASED ON GARBLE OF ASSETS CONTROL ISSUE.)

6. COMMENT: ROK REACTION TO SERIES OF EVENTS CONCERNING

NORTH KOREA HAS BEEN ALMOST EERILY CALM. ORDINARILY WE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED KOREANS TO BE CLIMBING THE WALLS AFTER THE NEWS OF REMOVAL OF TRAVEL BANS AND DIRECT REPLY BY U.S. PRESIDENT TO MESSAGE FROM KIM IL-SONG. THERE ARE THREE POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR THIS REACTION WHICH READILY COME TO MIND: A) THE KOREANS ARE TOO ALARMED TO REACT NORMALLY. B) THEY ARE CONCERNED THAT IF THEY OVER-REACT THEY WILL DAMAGE THEIR ALREADY PRECARIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE U.S. AND SO THEY ARE TRYING TO REMAIN CALM AND ARE HOPING FOR THE BEST. C) THIS IS THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM. LIKE ALL GOOD BUREAUCRATS WE LEAN TOWARDS OPTION B, BUT TRUTH COULD BE A COMBINATION OF ALL THREE.

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